

A long wild ride!

Bill Schumann reflects on his years in snowmobiling

By Evan Verploegh, Features Reporter



On Dec. 27, Manitowish Waters resident Bill Schumann received an honor no one will soon forget. A bridge, which diverts snowmobilers away from Hwy. K was dedicated to Schumann by the Manitowish Waters Sno-Skeeters, one of many clubs he has been involved with throughout the years.

Born and raised in Mt. Prospect, Ill., Schumann has been involved with the sport for much of his 86 year life and has served as president of both the Wisconsin and Illinois state snowmobile associations. In essence, Schumann has been a figurehead of midwestern snowmobiling since he was initially exposed to the sport in 1960 as a young man.

"I was working for the Borg Warner Corporation as a pilot and we were taking an airplane up to South St. Paul, Minn., for maintenance," Schumann said. "It was dark and I saw all these things zipping between the runways and I asked the air traffic control tower what they were. They said, "They're snowmobiles," and I said, "What's a snowmobile?"

Schumann said he spent an ensuing week in St. Paul where he took his first ride on a snowmobile and immediately fell in love. He said it has been that way ever since.

When asked what initially drew him to the sport, he insisted it was about being able to explore his natural surroundings in an efficient manner, as opposed to simply the need for speed.

"Back in those days you only had a single cylinder engine and you really didn't go very fast," Schumann said. "Nowadays, the machines are unbelievable."

Schumann is the only person to have served as president of two separate state snowmobile clubs and upon buying a home in Manitowish Waters nearly 20 years ago, joined the Sno-Skeeters, the Presque Isle Sno-Bunnies, the Northern Horseshoe Trails and the Low Buck Riders, where he pays his dues to this day. Before her passing in 2006, Bill's wife Lyla Schumann served as treasurer for the Sno-Skeeters.

"The Sno-Skeeters are a great club and very well run," Schumann said. "I've been around a lot of clubs and you can tell if one has good people. The Sno-Skeeters certainly do."

During Schumann's extensive involvement with snowmobiling on a statewide level, he has worked with seven different governors to establish positive relations between riders and the politicians. He said representing and standing up for the rights of snowmobilers has been one of the most fulfilling aspects in his participation with the sport.

Although he claims he's "slowing down," Schumann still rides and keeps up with the day-to-day snowmobiling news on a state and national scale.

I'll still do some riding this year, but

I don't go on long trips anymore," he said. "I also don't do any night riding."

Of the 48 ever International Snowmobile Congress, where discussions of how to continue the sport's growth into the future take place, Schumann has attended 39 of them, which has brought him all over the United States and into Canada. This is not to mention the amount of extensive trips he has taken on his snowmobile, which have allowed him to explore locations as remote as Iceland.

Throughout the discussion with Schumann, he commonly resorted back to a theme of safety and how no one can be too careful when operating a snowmobile. During the interview, a youth safety class was being conducted in the adjacent room at the Manitowish Waters Community Center, which informed young prospective riders on the necessary proceedings to be as safe as possible.

"That happens unfortunately during the busy times of the year and it's always very sad to hear," Schumann said while speaking on the Dec. 26 snowmobile fatality in Arbor Vitae.

Schumann said a message he hopes continues to resonate with riders is the complete avoidance of alcohol while riding. While "bar-hopping" on snowmobiles used to be a popular activity, Schumann said it is becoming more and more curtailed, which he is encouraged by.

"Education is so important for the sport," he said. "I always hate to hear that someone has been in an accident. For all we know, the man who was killed recently was the safest rider in the world, but it just takes that one slip up, but that's what you have to ready for. You can have fun. You don't have to go down the trails under speed or anything, but you have to be always on your toes."

Schumann said to have the bridge dedicated to him was a very big honor. He said as president of the Wisconsin and Illinois snowmobile associations he facilitated many similar dedication ceremonies, but never envisioned he would be receiving one himself.

"It was a nice feeling," he said. "I said to LuAnn Smit, who was the overseer of the event, that there are some people here who have been in the club longer than I, but I guess they were looking at the whole picture of things."

One thing Schumann has always stood by is the volunteer aspect he believes snowmobile clubs should operate under. Schumann said he does not believe people should be paid for operating groomers, but rather should be willing to do it for the love of the sport.

"That's one thing that I'm not shy in speaking out about. The officers and everyone else working in the club don't get paid, so why should the groomers? Plus, grooming is a lot of fun," he said. "You're out there in the middle of the night and snowmobilers are waving to you. It's a cool experience. When you start paying people like that, people will go out there and groom because they want the hourly pay. Maybe the trails could have gone without it."

Schumann is proud to say each member of the Manitowish Waters Sno-Skeeters are involved on a strictly volunteer basis. "I really can't say enough about this club," he said. "All they have to do is ask for a couple volunteers and people jump right in."

Welcome have been the advancements in both sleds and particularly the clothing that is now available, Schumann said. When he first began snowmobiling, he said people would wear whatever they could to attempt to stay warm.

"We've gone snowmobiling up here in 25 or 30 degrees below freezing," he said. "You get off and your shield is all covered with ice, but that's all part of the sport."

Schumann said he knows just about everyone in the world of snowmobiling and that he has made some of his best friends through the sport. Recently, the Sno-Skeeters purchased a Tucker groomer from Oregon. Schumann has long known the Tucker family, which helped in the facilitation of the transaction.

Looking ahead, Schumann said he is worried about the rising costs of the sport and hopes that does not act as a deterrent from people becoming involved. As sleds become more and more expensive and renting becomes more popular, he is concerned manufacturers may begin to suffer.

"You pay \$125 a day, but you get a new machine and you don't have to trailer it or maintain it," he said. "You put a pencil to it and a lot of people have figured out that it is cheaper to rent. The manufacturers don't like to hear that. I think something will have to change."

Overall, Schumann feels like the sport is headed in a very positive direction and is pleased to have been an integral part of its formative years. Having been honored by the International

Snowmobile Hall of Fame in 1997 and named U.S. Snowmobiler of the Year in 1992, having been honored by the Sno-Skeeters is just another feather in his cap.

"The sport has been great to me and I'll always be thankful for it,"

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Way to go Bill!!!!